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# CATALOGUING AND DOCUMENTATION OF MEDIAEVAL TEMPLES OF BENGAL : AN ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS AND METHODS

TARAPADA SANTRA

Temples of Bengal remain traditionally unappreciated by scholars and art historians. Some of these temples were built during the early mediaeval times. In addition to this, Bengal is spotted with numerous temples erected between 17th Century and 19th Century. These temples are important in respect of their numbers and archaeological, historical and social factors. Many of these structures are in ruins or completely destroyed due to change of courses of rivers, earthquakes and erosion in an atmosphere noted for its salinity. Onslaught of repeated epidemics, famines and widespread attack of 'Burdwan Fever' or Malaria made many rural areas of Bengal deserted by the people and consequently many temples gradually came to be destroyed due to the absence of proper maintenance. During the last centuries of the mediaeval period which followed the Muslim conquest artists of Bengal erected with the help of different kinds of stone and terracotta embellishment examples of a class of architecture and sculpture which could be taken as having a typical character of its own. So far no attempt has been made to make a census or list of the extant temples remaining on two sides of the divided Bengal.

At the time of the first archaeological investigations the number of standing monuments were more in number. As a result, greater attention was given on the structures of the pre-Mughal date. At that time no decision was taken regarding an evaluation of the artistic achievement and the problem of preservation of Bengal temples. In 1873 one of the highly placed officers of the then Archaeological Department, Mr. J. D. Begler commented that the famous terracotta temples of Bishnupur in Bankura District of West Bengal do not deserve mention due to their comparatively recent origin. Art historians like Fergusson also looked down on these temples of Bengal. As a result of this contemptuous attitude temples erected after 15th Century A. D. came to be regarded as degraded and not worthy of scholarly attention.

It is a fact that many of the temples with their unique terracotta decoration on the both sides of Bengal have already taken the path of destruction. But other extant temples are not yet beyond the scope of proper repairs and conservation work. It is evident that during the



beginning of the 16th Century A. D. a kind of revival started in respect of temple building. This revival deeply influenced the architectural forms and terracotta embellishments and created a new wave of enthusiasm. The long run effect of this trend continued even at the beginning of the 20th century. These sculptural decorations used to serve temple architecture contained a kind of liveliness and force of character strengthened by its natural affinity to folk art. This element helped to separate these temples from the style and technique of Pala and Sena periods and make these worthy to be studied as examples of the folk traditions of Bengal.

The initial neglect and highbrowed disdain regarding these temples was replaced by an understanding of their importance and some of these temples came to be protected and maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India at a later period. The Bishnupur Temples of Bankura, the Baranagar temple in Murshidabad, the Guptipara temple in Hooghly, Mathurapur temple in Faridpur and Palpara temple in Nadia were protected in this manner from total destruction. It is a sad fact that we do not know the number of temples destroyed due to neglect. The author of this paper attempted to make a list of the extant temples of this nature which are facing imminent destruction. While doing this work, he came across many sites where common people drew his attention to the ruinous traces of many decayed temples.

In 1930, the well known scholar on the folk culture of Bengal, Sri Gurusaday Dutt engaged himself in the study of terracotta temples of Bengal with a proper enthusiasm. It is to be noted that many other temples described in the different local histories of Bengal are now disappeared without leaving any trace. It has also been seen that photographs contained in those local histories are now the only proof of their existence in the past.

A situation like this created problems for modern scholars who want to study the architectural and sculptural techniques of Bengal terracotta temples including the study of the contemporary social life as related to and depicted through temple decorations. The first question that comes to the mind in this regard is connected with the information regarding the nature of temple-donors, their professions and the source of their affluence. Whether these temples were built by local landholders or Zaminders or at a later period even by the merchant class not dependent on land and men who participated in their erection are questions which seem to be important but remain to be properly investigated and are generally unanswered.

Information regarding the architects, architectural techniques of construction and carving of plaques used in decoration and type of materials utilised in temples etc. are not correctly known to us. It has been observed that even in areas with easy availability of stone, terracotta architectural decorations are used by the artist-architects. But no inves-



tigation of the reason behind the construction of terracotta temples in stony areas or *vice-versa* is not properly investigated or studied.

Want of a competent catalogue or thorough documentation created various problems for the research scholars. Some of these scholars have recently observed that the artists responsible for creating terracotta decorations on temples completely disappeared about one hundred years ago. As an example the hundred-year old and completely undecorated Navaratna Temple of Dakshineswar of Rani Rashmani has been often cited. This conclusion is based presumably on the assumption that absence of sculptural decoration is an undeniable proof of the absence of living artists and a practising community of architects. This apparently unassailable conclusion has been altered by the initial work undertaken by the present author regarding compilation of a fully documented catalogue of Bengal temples. The information derived from his efforts is of quite different nature. The inscribed temples in various parts of Bengal have the year, date and the name and address of the architects. From this source we come to know that artists in terracotta carried on and continued this tradition even at the beginning of the 20th Century. It has been further observed from this source that Zaminders and landlords are not the only class who patronised the erection of temples. People who amassed considerable wealth due to their participation in or connection with indigo and silk plantations during the later periods widely took part as donors in the work of building temples in different parts of the country. Moreover, we come to know with the help of the names and addresses of the architects inscribed on temples their concentrations in different parts of the country. It also helps us to understand various area-wise concentration of artist-architects responsible for the rise of different localised styles of temple building.

The reasons stated above unmistakably underline the importance and need of documentation of Bengal temples. Taking into account the enormous importance of organised work, Ananda Niketan Kirtisala, a rural museum of Nabasan village in Howrah district chalked out a plan to start full-scale documentation work. With this end in view a plan was drawn up to prepare a card-index of temples in the different districts of West Bengal. For this work help of a honorary worker was found to be available but the question of meeting expenses on tours of temple-sites and the cost of photography etc. posed a difficult financial problem. Many appeals and applications were submitted and placed before the State and Central Government authorities. But these appeals failed to get any response. In this situation, Ananda Niketan Kirtisala took up the work of temple documentation without depending on others. It is encouraging that the efforts in this respect for noting down the cultural relics of the country met some help from interested scholars and other



broadminded gentlemen who helped this work by lending photographic instruments, etc.

The information collected for preparing the card index envisaged under this plan could be divided into two major parts. In one of these, the detailed account of the temple and related information is placed. The other part the work is related to the need of keeping photographic prints and negatives with accompanying and corresponding classification numbers. In the card index entries the following information are usually given :—

- (1) Date of inspection. (2) Name of District. (3) Name of Police station. (4) Name of mauza. (5) Name of village within a mauza. (6) Name of the area or locality. (7) Name of the temple and its descriptive account including : (a) Type of the temple *e.g.*, Chārchālā, Ātchālā, Dochālā or Ratna or Sikhara etc. (b) the name of the deity enshrined in the temple. *e.g.* Sridhara Jiu, Madan Gopal, Bhuteswar Siva, etc. (c) the directional orientation of the temple : information which is much required for proper photography of the temple-structures. This is important because a temple facing west should be visited in the afternoon for proper photography, while temples facing east require the taking of photograph in the forenoon or morning (d) the material used in the temple bricks or stone, etc. (e) whether there is any sculptural decoration or not—whether the decoration is in stone or terracotta (f) the length, breadth and the height of the temple. (g) the architectural method of laying the roof of the temple, *i.e.* flat roof, dome, half-vaulted structure or corbelled roof structure, etc. (8) The description of the icon *i.e.* whether it is linga, Sālagrāma or the image of any other god including the material of the object of worship and an information whether the rites of worship are regularly performed or not. (9) An account of the temple-donor and his caste, title and profession (10) Name of the architect which is sometimes given on the inscribed slabs. (11) Date of erection and/or inscribed plaque. (12) any special information *i.e.* whether there are any temple-doors with designs and examples of wood carvings, the existence of any mithuna plaque or any sign of information related to the erection of the temple. (13) Printed account regarding the temple published in books and journals.

Now the left side of the card is utilised for pasting a contact-print of the temple-photograph. Below this contact-print on the right the negative number and the accession number are noted down in red ink. A separate register is maintained for noting down information regarding accession number of the negative and the related description.

In the accession register the following information are available :

- (1) the accession number is divided into three units. The first two



digits refer to the year of collection. The value of the second digital unit correspond to the serial number of each collection during the year. The third part of the unit is a component part of the second unit. For example, let us take the case of Shiddheswari temple of Baital village in Bankura District which has got three photographs taken in 1971. So the respective number for these photographs would be 71· 21· 1, 71· 21· 2 and 71· 21· 3 etc. (2) the date of accession (3) name of district, police station and village where the photograph was taken (4) description of the subject, matter of the photograph i.e. if it is a temple, masjid, inscription or palatial structure etc. (5) description of the subject-matter of the photograph (6) name of the photographer (7) date of photography, (8) position of the negative in the museum (a) registration and classification number (b) cabinet and shelf number (9) information of print and enlargements (a) volume and part number of the album (b) page number of the album.

After the accession number of the negative, the catalogue number or call number is given. With the help of this number negatives are found out. This number is divided according to the districts. For this purpose a particular digital number is given to the individual districts of West Bengal. This number is composed of two parts, viz., the number of district and the serial number divided by a point in between. Let us suppose that the catalogue number of the negative is 14.25. It means that it is the 25th negative of district number 14 meaning Jalpaiguri.

After the line of the catalogue number of the negative information regarding the placing of negative in the museum is given. This part of the card-index is noted down in pencil so that it could be changed whenever required. It is followed by information relating to enlargements in print and the volume, part and folio numbers of the album in which they are kept.

For protecting the negatives they are always wrapped with oil paper and placed in small envelopes pasted on two sides. They are kept in such a manner so that they could not come into contact of the gum used in the envelope. On the right hand corner of this envelope the accession number is noted down in Indian ink. The left side of the envelope is used for noting down the catalogue number. Finally, these negatives are arranged district-wise and placed inside metal containers.